Photographs by George Hurrell

Who Is David Byrne? What Is David Byrne? Does David Byrne Matter? YES.

by James Kaplan

In the summer of 1981, I was driving east on Route 24 near Short Hills, New Jersey, a stretch of new road that several years before had, at a stroke, transformed the leafy suburban terrain of my childhood into a futuristic landscape—that had, at a stroke, allowed for the rapid transit of many lanes of cars between the city, which lay strung across the horizon twenty miles distant, and the newly expanded, transfigured and futurized, mall. I was driving along that stretch of road, at a point where it rises to a maximum elevation and then falls, giving a sudden vista of the gigantic suburban/industrial plain spreading toward the city, when I turned on the radio and my life was changed.

Now, that has an unfortunate sound to it, an evangelistic sound—as if I had heard the word of God out there on Route 24, as if, like those people who put bumper stickers that say, I FOUND IT! on their cars, I had been looking for something that was missing from my life, and suddenly *here*

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it was! On the car radio!

That wasn't quite how it happened.

What I heard when I turned on the rock 'n' roll station that afternoon was like nothing I had heard before—totally unlike what I guess I wanted and expected to hear: the rock 'n' roll of the past, with its friendly or mock-menacing, infectious, always sexual, anthemlike, we're-all-in-it-together lull. What I heard instead was a man declaiming, like a radio preacher:

And you may find yourself
living in a shotgun shack
And you may find yourself
in another part of the world
And you may find yourself
behind the wheel of a large
automobile
And you may find yourself
in a beautiful house,
with a beautiful wife
And you may ask yourself
Well... how did I get here?

But this wasn't a radio preacher. His voice was set against a shimmering background of bells, punctuated by a rock backbeat. Before I knew what was happening, several voices had joined in, singing in ecstatic chorus:

Letting the days go by
water flowing underground
Into the blue again
after the money's gone
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They had my attention—but what was I listening to? The context was rock 'n' roll, yet this wasn't rock 'n' roll. Not in any familiar sense. The voices were not white voices trying to sound black; the subject was not love or the singer himself or rock 'n' roll itself; the melodic structure was not yet another variant of the twelve-bar, three-chord blues. The song sounded as much like an American Indian rain dance or a Buddhist chant as it sounded like rock. And the subject—what *was* the subject?

Water? Time? Permanence and change? Dislocation? Whatever it was, it wasn't the usual stuff of rock lyrics. What I felt wasn't the usual, either. What I felt was a kind of awe, almost like the transcendent feeling that great art—say, Mozart's Forty-first—engenders. Rock, which is rooted in sex, rarely triggers the feeling. You might get a frisson from the second side of *Abbey Road,* and a smidgen of it from "Third Stone from the Sun." Here, however, the material seemed to be of a different order. Through the use of connotative rather than denotative language (the method of poetry), the song seemed to connect me with my context (the futuristic landscape) in an intensified way. What I was hearing seemed at once removed and intimate, visionary, funny, ecstatic, optimistic and pessimistic. It somehow linked the abiding earth to the sense that we live, nowadays, in a TV set whose channel is constantly being changed.

In 1975, when Route 24 was being cut through the green hills of suburban New Jersey, when, in a way, this country was poised at the top of the roller coaster between the last era and the current one, there were all kinds of ways to ignore what the new road really was—ways to see it as a handsome and successful engineering project, or, conversely, as an impolite intrusion on the woodsy-lane landscape. It may have been both those things, yet even more it was a case of time advancing, not smoothly, but with a ratcheting jolt. Likewise it would have been easy to dismiss the song I heard that afternoon in 1981 as an oddity, or, complimentarily, as a nice rock number with strange words and a catchy beat. It was both those things, and neither.

Who was responsible?

THE TIME IS TODAY. I AM IN THE BACK ROOM of a small house in Dallas. The house, on a hot and dusty back street in a marginal neighborhood, is a one-story beige-brick structure that was gutted a few years ago and turned into a hospice, a place for terminally ill patients to live out their last days in comfort. But even more recently it has undergone another transformation. It is now the production office for *True Stories,* David Byrne's new movie, his first as a director. (This is a more natural step for Byrne than might be imagined. He has produced and directed several Talking Heads videos, and recently appeared in and collaborated on the concert film *Stop Making Sense.*) The interior of the house is clean, white, and modern, thoroughly and quietly air-conditioned. The ceilings are high, the floors terra-cotta tile. Ceiling fans turn slowly. The place resembles a cutting-edge design studio—which is not far off the mark. Polaroids and panoramas of Texas locations, prefab metal buildings and wide empty plains and blank blue skies and long straight empty roads cover the walls. Multiline phones ring constantly. Tex-Mex accordion music plays in the background. There is a water cooler, a toaster oven, a big refrigerator full of sodas and juices. In the back room of the house, David Byrne is watching audition tapes, trying to make a difficult casting decision. In the room along with him are Karen Murphy, his producer; Vickie Thomas, his casting director; and myself. The choice is between two actors, both of whom have done good audition tapes, each of whom has read the character differently. Byrne sits at the desk, in the power position. Jokes are made, and suggestions, but he is the ultimate arbiter, and is watched anxiously, deferred to. I watch him. I have spent many hours with him at this point, but I have never gotten used to his face. In an age when more and more we look alike, he resembles no one else. This seems to be true no matter what light or what mood he's in, and no matter what he's wearing. In fact, David Byrne must be the only clean-cut white male in the world who can look weird—absolutely, defiantly, definitively weird—in a button-down shirt. He has a smallish, squarish, delicately boned head; very dark, almost black hair (surprisingly, liberally streaked with gray); and what would be standard Scotch-Irish-dark-handsome features, except—except that the gestalt is skewed just a few degrees to the other side of normal by his most arresting feature, his eyes. These are odd eyes, to say the least. Look on the back cover of the latest Talking Heads album, *Little Creatures,* and you'll see: they are extremely wide-set eyes, very round and very dark (the pupils almost indistinguishable from the irises), with the unsettling quality of looking directly at you and over your shoulder at once. They are the eyes of a mesmerist or a dictator. Byrne is aware of this fact, and uses it, to great effect, both in performance and in walking-around life. He never seems to smile in performance, but even if, in an informal situation, he breaks into an engagingly crooked-toothed grin, a moment later those eyes are staring again—at you or over your shoulder or into space, or all three at once, and it's as if a curtain has come down.

We have now viewed the audition tapes of both actors several times, and matters are at an impasse. Byrne is silent, his gaze focused somewhere through the far wall. Suddenly somebody notices a videocassette, in the rack below the TV, marked TALKING HEADS CBGB'S 1975. The tension is momentarily broken. We ask Byrne if we can put it on. Sure, he says. The tape rolls. It's black-and-white. There's a freeze-frame, for a half minute or so, of an empty, tiny stage. Then suddenly the band is there, in its 1975 incarnation—just three of them—Byrne, Tina Weymouth on bass, and Chris Frantz on drums. They are wearing button-down shirts and grave expressions. They resemble a particularly straight, particularly nervous high school band trying out, not very hopefully, in a talent contest on a public-access cable-TV station. Byrne seems younger (his hair's longer), but not markedly different. Anyway, it's hard to tell because I can't see his eyes: they're either closed or cast down so far as to seem closed. He seems paralyzed with stage fright. "The name of this band is Talking Heads, and the name of this song is 'Psycho Killer,'" he mumbles quickly into the microphone, and the band starts to play. This is the first song Byrne wrote for Talking Heads, a character monologue, a beautifully disturbing paranoiac's lament, with strange interjections in French. I have heard it performed recently—especially in *Stop Making Sense,* where Byrne sings it as a hypnotic solo, strumming an acoustic guitar to the accompaniment of a rhythm cassette while he croons the crazy words, his unsettling eyes flashing. But I'm unprepared for the ten-year-old version: *Byrne never opens his eyes.* He stands stiffly

and chants in a near monotone:

I can't seem to face up to the facts
I'm tense and nervous and I can't relax...
Psycho killer, qu'est-ce que c'est?
Fa fa fa fa...

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The tape ends; the screen is blank. In the TV glass I see the reflected image of the 1985 Byrne, sitting impassively behind the desk. He is wearing a pinstripe button-down shirt with the top button fastened, and a straw Charlie Chan summer fedora. We clear our throats. "Somehow I get the impression, David," Murphy says, "that you have a much better time performing nowadays than you did then."

We laugh. Byrne is silent a moment. "You never know," he says quietly. "It's all inside."

Huh?

I'm an or-di-na-ry guy.
—David Byrne, "Burning Down the House"

He was always afraid of becoming an ordinary person.
—Tina Weymouth, on David Byrne

TINA WEYMOUTH HAS, MORE THAN ONCE, referred to David Byrne as a "loose ego." This has a clinical sound to it, but it is not unhelpful. One thinks of Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, unstuck in time; and of Walker Percy's young, wandering heroes, detached in spirit. I have at times wondered, seriously and not necessarily uncomplimentarily, if Byrne is an alien, an interplanetary visitor in our midst: so odd are his aspect, his affect. "*Simple and general human conditions [prevail] among the most seemingly sophisticated.*" Thus Saul Bellow, in *Herzog*. I digested this wisdom early, wore it for a frontlet between my eyes. It seemed a universal key, a comfort in the most intimidating situation—until I met Byrne. *Something was up.*

Something was new. At our first meeting, at a Japanese restaurant in Manhattan in early spring, I was pleased that he arrived precisely on time, then I spent the rest of the session trying to get my bearings. He had said on the phone that he just wanted to have a drink; he was going to eat later. But then he kept *ordering* things, odd, unrelated things: different appetizers, noodles, beer, sake, Scotch. It was as if he were trying on clothes—or personalities. He took out a pack of Winstons, lit one, and held it and smoked it as if a human being were smoking a cigarette for the first time. There was something strange, too, about his carriage: he seemed simultaneously loose and stiff. When he leaned over to get a closer look at something I was writing, he bent from the waist, his neck rigid, like a curious bird. The conversation, also, felt jerky, fractionated. There were long silences. He laughed from time to time, crooked-toothed, but it was as if something were being wrenched from him. Yet I did manage to find out something interesting that night: he had been born in Scotland. It seemed along the way toward explaining something. In a way, he really *was* alien Old World: courteous, watchful, removed. He told me a story about his parents visiting him and listening to a tape of his new album. They sat before the speakers, rigid, in identical clothing and berets. He laughed. Odd story. Parents as furniture! We shared a cab afterward. I felt as though the evening had been fairly successful, but when I said goodnight, Byrne responded without looking at me, without even turning his head. Seated in the back of the cab, he appeared, suddenly, not so much seated as placed, as though someone had picked him up and put him there.

Our second meeting, at another Japanese restaurant, went a little better. For one thing, his girlfriend, Bonny Lutz, was present, so Byrne was looser; he joked a bit, smiled more. Yet still he seemed extraordinarily closed—complex to a Henry Jamesian degree. I had dutifully brought a list of questions, and he dutifully answered them, but it was hard work maintaining a flow, getting him to elaborate on anything. Then as tea came something happened. I had been asking him in a desultory way about other musicians and singers when all at once his eyes flashed. "One of the worst things about rock 'n' roll is this whole cult of personality," he said, and I was surprised—both by the passion and by the statement.

Was he merely dismissing rivals? One by one, out they went like light bulbs, swamis of the dread personality cult: Jagger, Joel, Prince, Sting, Michael, Huey....

Suddenly, however, something clicked. To watch Byrne perform is to see a distinct absence of charisma-mongering, to witness a new form of stage personality. He emits nearly unbearable emotional intensity without seeming to expend any actual emotion. He is a role, a mask; the actual character of the human behind it is a moot question. The Western tradition of theatrical performance has centered on the projection (or simulation) of warmth, and has sought as its object love, or desire, or both. *Byrne simply doesn't do this.* He gains strength and confidence from a responsive audience, but doesn't beg for its affection. He doesn't flirt. He doesn't chat. This has to do with his shyness, and it has much to do with the subject matter of his songs. What Byrne presents instead is without category. Byrne's lyrics, in combination with the band's music, are not poetry, yet they are to American popular music of the past what serious poetry is to light verse.

And you can dance to it.

How did he get here?

How did we all get here?

A YEAR OR SO AGO I WENT SHOPPING AT Tower Records in downtown Manhattan. It was a weekday night, but the neighborhood was jumping. You had the feeling that the weekend never really stopped around here, and that at least part of what was going on was a kind of celebration of Manhattan's Latest New Thing. But what was the thing? It wasn't clear, yet it seemed to have to do with this part of town, where there was a kind of vibrating border line between the squalid and the trendy, between the old, gray piece-goods storefronts on lower Broadway and the new restaurants with platformed dining areas, high-tech appointments, and pink neon lighting; it seemed to have to do with hair and clothes, which around here were severe and spiky and futuristic and which appeared to refer in an ironic way to the hair and clothes of the Fifties, the last time America was placid and self-satisfied. The New Thing seemed to have a lot to do with Tower Records itself, the perfect pleasure dome of the Eighties. Tower Records seemed to promise that you could go into a sort of shopping trance and emerge with enough music so that you would never quite have to pay attention again. None of this New Thing–ness was precisely new to me, but seeing so great a concentration of it was. I paid for my records and went to the bag-check counter, where I had left my attaché case—ironic object in this ironic part of town! The young woman behind the counter had spiky hair and a black shirt torn jaggedly at the neck and sleeves, but she was quite attractive nevertheless, her skin pale and lovely. I smiled at her as I handed her my check number. But her face, as she handed me my attaché, was hard and blank. There was no censure or hostility in her eyes—there was nothing in her eyes at all.

You might get the feeling, if you spend any time these days where devotees of the newest music, the newest looks, gather, that the Stare—the cut-you-dead stone-face designed to preempt, at all costs, the possibility of a pleasant chat—is a brand-new thing. I think not. I would guess that it has existed for exactly sixty-seven years, since the end of the War to End All Wars demonstrated to a horrified nineteenth century the advent of the murderous, mechanized twentieth. It was the huge and absurd slaughter of that war that brought the concept of the absurd into art. The avant-garde looked at what the war had done to Apollinaire and Gaudier-Brzeska and millions of others and gazed back blankly at the blank universe. See it in the eyes of Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs; and, in a variation, in the eyes of Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Thelonius Monk, Charlie Parker. In music, blackness and drugs complicated the picture. Andy Warhol complicated it even further when he introduced painting, music, and movies to fashion and squalor.

The Stare entered the Sixties gaining ground fast. Rock music and drugs allowed

middle-class white kids to Stare, too. Lou Reed, of the magisterially vacant gaze, made his song "Heroin" into a kind of anthem. Dylan learned to Stare, and taught Lennon. The West Coast was cheerier, but Altamont and Charles Manson ended that. Then the Sixties were over, and the Beatles broke up, and the times and the drugs went bad, and the ante was upped. With the density of events—Watergate and the oil embargo and Nixon's resignation and the end of the war and our loss of nuclear superiority—increasing geometrically, maniacally, any false sense of control over the karma of the world that might have existed in the previous decade now scattered to the winds. As did any sense of communality. Suddenly there was no longer any avant-garde—*everyone* was Staring. We were isolate individuals in an absurdly dangerous world. Technology, but not much else, was flourishing. Irony, always the avant-garde's most useful tool, had depended on an established order. Now there was no established order. Art reacted accordingly. Irony was institutionalized (and debased). Conceptualism, discord, and remove came to the fore. So did several appropriate characters, one in particular.

> ... in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence... spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive.
>
> A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree, with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow.
>
> —Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*

BYRNE ENTERED THE MID-SEVENTIES THE way he has always done things—in his own particular manner. He had grown up in a blue-collar neighborhood in Baltimore, had formed a rock band in junior high. Nothing unusual there. With the collapse of the band, though, he began to perform as a single, and his individualism—his eccentricity—flourished. He performed rock numbers on unaccompanied ukulele in folk clubs. When Byrne went to Rhode Island School of Design for his one and only year, he found that his fellow students were rich and long-haired and fashionably alienated; Byrne was poor and short-haired and *really* alienated—from his fellow students as well as everything else. He didn't want to be a painter; he was too shrewd for that. Painting was bourgeois and moribund. Art was teetering. How to make it new? In the manner of the times, he did performance pieces. In one of these he shaved his beard while a friend flashed Russian messages on cue cards. Why not? He also formed a band, called the Artistics (though their playing style got them retitled the Autistics). His odd looks and distinctive behavior made him a RISD campus legend. Rhode Island wouldn't hold him long.

IN 1975 YOU COULD WEAR A MOHAWK AND put a safety pin in your cheek, thus putting a safe distance between yourself and Paul McCartney. And safety pins might shock the Heartland, but lower Manhattan was more diverse, more demanding: The reaction south of Fourteenth and east of Park to the typically overproduced, ornate, and vapid mainstream pop of the mid-Seventies was a rash of raw bands that played three-chord songs and shouted strange lyrics. Here the avant-garde was staging a last-ditch holding action. There were the New York Dolls, the Ramones, the Planets, the Shirts, the Marbles, the Mumps, the Dictators. Each tried to outdo the others in strangeness and disturbingness. Damn the bourgeoisie! Full speed ahead! *L'art pour l'art!* Black was the color, none the number. Gauntness was all. Every *poète* was *maudit*.

Moments before the 1975 performance: "They resemble a particularly straight, particularly nervous high-school band trying out, not very hopefully, in a talent contest on a public-access cable-TV station."

In 1975, a Stare to top all Stares came to the stage of CBGB's, a hole-in-the-wall on the Bowery, and *the* club. Byrne was long-legged and painfully thin, with a shock of black hair; dark, piercing, wide-set eyes; and crooked teeth. (One front tooth was broken, the result of a childhood mishap.) Even among the strange humans who played on the club's tiny stage, Byrne's band, Talking Heads (himself on guitar; Chris Frantz, a friend from RISD and the son of an Army general, on drums; and Martina Weymouth, the daughter of a retired admiral, on bass), stood out. For one thing, you could understand their lyrics, strange as they were. For another, they dressed as no one else in the whole mean-streets, hollow-eyed scene dared to dress: like "normal" kids. Button-downs in the Bowery! Alligators at the Mudd Club! It was a brilliant move, whether ingenuous or dis-. (It seems to have been a little of both.) Byrne himself has said, "We were into dressing like kids, regular kids... kind of like if you looked at the census, what we figured the average person looks like.... It would kind of be a sneaky way of putting our music over. No one would suspect that someone who looked so normal could play music so strange. But they'd like it anyway, because we looked just like them. That was our big plan." Looking normal, being disciplined and intelligible, was an extraordinary way of having their cake and eating it too, of out-psyching rival bands, of out-psyching everyone. It was a way of making irony vibrate back and forth as if in a hall of mirrors until the observer didn't know *what* the hell was coming off. It was a way of showing all the hip art-schoolers that something totally new was here. It was a way of turning rock 'n' roll into actual art.

AS MANY OF THE EAST VILLAGE bands were getting record contracts, and as what came to be called New Wave music became subsumed into popular culture, less and less able to shock and more and more concerned with style at the expense of substance—as the Stare grew multifloriate, decadent branches (*vide* the B-52's, beehive-hair-bizarro-Fifties-style Stare; Blondie, fashion-model Stare; Devo, we-are-not-men Stare)—David Byrne continued to do what he had always done: think. Artistically it was impossible for him to do a thoughtless thing. Talking Heads now had a record contract, too; but although the albums came out yearly, beginning in 1977, at first the music was an acquired taste. The songs were prickly, dryly humorous, uningratiating. People who liked their music this way loved the band, but the people who were buying "Heart of Glass" by the gross didn't know from Talking Heads. Byrne, Weymouth, and Frantz (and now Jerry Harrison) wanted to be popular, but on their own terms. One interesting problem was, What should the band, and especially Byrne, *do* when they perform? At first they just stood there. It was... kind of interesting. But it wore thin. "I thought rock 'n' roll dancing was disgusting," Byrne said. "I wanted to be direct and real." Byrne decided that what he had to avoid at all costs was the foundations of rock dancing: sex sex sex and me me me. Stage dancing in rock had always been roughly the same strutting, leaping, wiggling, and posturing. In the beginning there was Elvis, then Mick—and nobody else (even the so-called New Wave) had gone very far afield. Rock dancing had al-

COURTESY OF METROPOLIS VIDEO

ways been about the white idea of blackness. But just as Byrne has never attempted to sound like a black man, he never tried to move like one. He has a long-limbed, loose, skinny body—a mime's body—and a blank but eloquent face—a mime's face. This kind of physical equipment is a God-given gift to a performer, and Byrne took the gift and used it. He reinvented the art.

By 1978, Byrne had met the British musical genius Brian Eno, and now Talking Heads had a new producer. The raw, stripped-down East Village sound began to go. By their third album together, *Remain in Light,* the band's music had been completely transformed. There were horns, electronic sounds, African polyrhythms: a complex texture that moved the band in one huge leap from Manhattan quirkiness to a kind of World Sound. Songs like "Houses in Motion," "The Great Curve," and "Seen and Not Seen" were at once highly listenable, technically lush, lyrically powerful, and urgently advanced. But one song stood even higher than the rest. It was beautiful, funny, and hauntingly infectious. It was more than compelling: it had the anthemlike quality, the humor, and the memorability of a major hit. The group chose to make it into their first video. It was the song I had heard on the radio, "Once in a Lifetime."

The first time most Americans saw Byrne was in this video, which came out in 1981. It was something of a shock as videos go: no thighs, no spike heels, no lingerie, no car chases—it was mostly just this ecstatic, sweaty, disquietingly skinny guy with slicked-back black hair and black horn-rimmed glasses and a dark business suit, flopping, jerking, twitching, and swimming against a background of fake flowing water. What was the video about? Well, water flowing, for one thing—but mainly it was about David Byrne. He looked odd... spastic, somehow. He kept smacking himself on the forehead with his palm, snapping his head back. Okay, what was wrong with the guy? Some people got the mistaken impression from this video that Byrne was, or was trying to pass as, some sort of Super Nerd, but these were only people who believed in this kind of category to begin with, people who confused the singer with the song. *These were people who were behind the times.* In fact, it took incredible grace and control and originality to move the way Byrne did. It also took incredible grace and control and originality to create a video this dreamlike, this powerful. What Byrne was up to in 1981 was establishing a standard that we are only now beginning to appreciate.

TWO IMPROMPTU PERFORMANCES:

● Byrne is halfway out the door of the Dallas production office when he realizes he's left something on the desk. He falls back into the room, tumbles back to the desk, arms waving, as if he's been blown back by a high wind. He manages to make the action look utterly natural.

● I'm walking him to the elevator in a hotel lobby. He is in a hurry to get upstairs, but he's in the middle of telling me something. So when the elevator door opens he gets halfway in, continuing his sentence. The door starts to close, hits him and opens again, starts to close, hits him and opens again—over and over until he has finished his entire thought. He staggers limply each time the door bounces off him.

BYRNE IN THE PRODUCTION OFFICE, MAKing calls: He's on the phone to New York, trying to track down actors and technical people. He doesn't always get through to the people he wants, and several times he has to leave a message. He has to spell his name. But he does this with real authority, coolness, a very slight undercurrent of annoyance. In the office, he gives orders easily, neither apologetic nor domineering. He has surrounded himself with talented people, strong personalities, and when someone argues he listens, unthreatened. I think of what Hilly Kristal, the owner of CBGB's, told me about the Byrne of the early days: "He was a leader. He had self-discipline. He knew what he was doing."

That afternoon Byrne and I are returning from a fashion show at the Dallas Apparel Mart. There's a fashion show in his movie, and he wanted to take some pictures of the real show to get some ideas about how his ought to look. We're driving through back streets, silent. Cars are usually a good place to talk, yet Byrne and I say nothing. In a way I am resigned to this. I still feel as if I barely know him. He has gotten friendlier—in a reactive way. He has never initiated a conversation with me. So I observe him as much as I can, hoping to catch some idiosyncrasy unawares.

He's a good driver, easy and natural. He has at least this much of the Standard American Male in him. One thing that fascinates me: What would David Byrne listen to on the car radio? Jazz for a while, but then he gets restless. He tunes through country, Tex-Mex, a talk-show discussion about guns (he stays here for a few moments), Top Forty. He tunes into Huey Lewis's latest, which I rather like, and tunes right out again. Finally he hits on some New Wave. "Searchin', searchin', searchin'," the singer chants, again and again and again, in a monotone, over some dissonant guitar. Byrne clicks the radio off. We ride in silence.

And yet. The next morning we go to a Mexican flea market. It's close to midday, dusty, about 105 degrees out. Byrne is in his Dallas mufti: part disguise, part costume, part protection against the heat. It consists of the Charlie Chan hat, little round sunglasses, a blue button-down shirt, baggy gray pleated pants, and white bucks. Over his shoulder is slung a Nikon. He resembles a Thirties tourist in some hot colonial outpost. As a disguise, the outfit is minimally effective. He may not look exactly like *him,* but he certainly doesn't resemble anyone else, either. He keeps taking pictures of everything until, finally, the manager of one of the booths tells him, obscurely and a little menacingly, that this might not be such a good idea. He stops taking pictures. For a while I keep him in the corner of my eye, but I don't follow him around—I have finally hit on the most effective way of observing Byrne. The problem is, you occasionally lose him. A while later, I have done just that. I'm looking over some watches and cameras when suddenly he comes out of nowhere, right up to my shoulder, startling me. "I found a T-shirt that says, MERCENARIES DON'T DIE—THEY JUST GO TO HELL AND REGROUP," he says, delightedly. I, too, am delighted. He has initiated a conversation. He buys the shirt.

BYRNE SEEMS TO BE HAPPY THESE DAYS. He's having fun making his movie. He has grown comfortable with his music, even though this means, since his art was once the art of discomfort, that his music has changed considerably. He seems to be able to change at an amazing rate. His latest songs are about babies and levitation. This seems peculiarly, Byrne-ishly, appropriate: on one hand, he has grown along with his generation and has come to consider what we're all thinking about; on the other, his viewpoint has always been removed—a viewpoint from a space platform. He will never not surprise us. Happiness with Byrne is a relative matter. The world is getting no less dangerous, and he's something more than of the world—he's a kind of figurehead on its prow. His strangeness and that of the age are, in many ways, one. His art—an art of the nervous, of the offhand—is an ideal art for the age, of the age. But—*is it really art?*

We long ago passed the point where rock 'n' roll was merely an instrument of rebellion. The kids who used it for that are the grown-ups now. The shock of the new is commonplace. The established order and the ironic rebellion are one. The avant-garde is dead. Time is speeding up, accelerating at a blood-rushing, dizzying rate. This throws an enormous responsibility on today's artist. Whatever interesting thing he throws at the public will be digested and assimilated almost instantly.

When I first heard Talking Heads' new album, *Little Creatures,* I was pleased but unimpressed. The music was tuneful, different for the band—but how did it advance the game? It turned out I was the unadvanced one. It was only when I saw the video of "Road to Nowhere" that I finally began to understand where Byrne was heading. The video uses a stunning variety of techniques—hand-colored pho-

to animation, collage, multi-split screens, object symbolism—to create the audiovisual equivalent of a poem. It somehow manages to convey holiness and humor at the same time. Watch an hour of MTV sometime and see if anything does *that.* Byrne is at once dismissing the phonograph album, as a single-sense experience, and the common video, as a two-dimensional bore. Video technology, he's saying, is rich with possibilities beyond imagining. Why not exploit them to the maximum? What he's done this time is what he's always done: presented us with some singularly advanced information, information that we are eager to receive, but whose full import we may not yet realize.

Which is just about how great art has always worked.

Is this great art? Great I don't know about. It's *our* art.

AT A COMBINATION BAR-LAUNDRY IN Dallas called Suds, Byrne is being taped receiving an MTV Video Vanguard Award. At the same time, he is actually doing his laundry. The scenario calls for him to walk down an aisle, open up a washing machine, pull out the award (with a sock draped around it), look surprised, then make a brief acceptance speech. He's in High Geek mode for the spot: his eyes are wide and glassy; his head bobs chicken-style on his scrawny neck as he walks up the aisle holding the heavy, metal spaceman statuette. He's wearing a garish madras jacket, and garish madras pants of a completely different pattern. I'm looking on with two Texas guys, two good ol' boys with beards, oil-rig sunburns, and T-shirts. They're watching open-mouthed. "*What's* his name?" one of them asks me. I tell him. "That's it," he says. "That is one outrageous dude, man." Later, in the bar, they come up to Byrne, shy as schoolgirls, and ask for his autograph.

It's time for me to leave, and Byrne drives me to the airport. We are as silent as ever in the car, and yet—Byrne has chosen to drive me to the airport. We move across the huge, overdeveloped Texas landscape—mirror skyscrapers and flatlands as far as the eye can see. This is the landscape of the future. I think of a rock video, orange mercury-vapor clouds racing across a night sky, reflected in glass buildings. At the wheel Byrne is still wearing the madras jacket from the MTV spot; he has on his little round sunglasses. For some reason I suddenly think of car trips I made as a boy, and I remember two-lane blacktop and Burma-Shave signs. *Burma-Shave signs.* I ask Byrne if he remembers them. He does indeed, he says; he saw them in Virginia when he was small. And I think of all that has happened between that time and this, the accelerating press of events, and suddenly time seems to me something like a high wind, a gale sweeping us all along.

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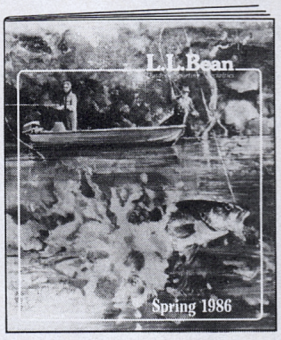

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